Symbols and Rituals: An Interpretive Approach to Faith-Based Behavior

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Memorable Words

"The phrase 'nothing is a practical as good theory' is a twist of an older truth: Nothing improves theory more than its confrontation with practice"

(Hans Zetterberg, 1962, page 189).

Overview: Framework for Making Sense of Geertz's Theory

❖ Models –   Exemplary root theorists

❖ Metaphors –   Theory's root metaphors

❖ Mapping –   Theoretical elements and relations, Translation to eco-map

❖ Method -   Directives for further inquiry & theory use

❖ Middle-range theorizing   Theory-based applications (Inquiry and planned change)

❖ Marks of Excellence   Critical thinking about theory

Clifford Geertz and
The Symbolic Anthropology Approach

This approach to religion and spirituality provides an analysis of the system of meanings embodied in the symbols and expressed in rituals which make up the religion or spiritual system (for a focal social group), and the relating of these systems to social-structural and psychological processes
(Geertz, 1973, page 125).
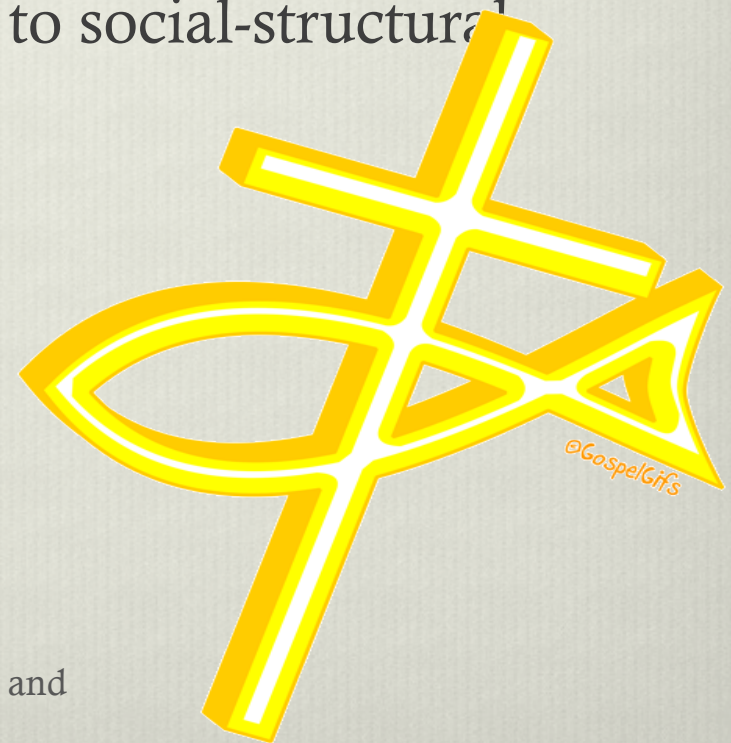
Associated Schools of Thought

Symbolic Anthropology – framework for understanding faith-based beliefs and behaviors of members of a religious group that prioritizes the interpretation of a cultural system of meanings embedded in symbols (holy water, the rosary, the cross, ashes, for examples) and expressed in processes such as rituals (the seven Catholic sacraments, for example)

Related Interpretive Approaches

❖ **Phenomenology** – focus on the experiential aspects of religion and how experiences are interpreted and shared.

❖ **Semiotics** – study of the signs including symbols and the processes of sign usage constituting a religion.

❖ **Symbolic Interactionism** – study of religion as one set of symbolic meanings that individuals derive from their experiences with their social groups; one that provides cultural values that underlie many rewarding interactions, and study of how these shared meanings and values give rise to social order and change.

❖ **Wittgenstein's philosophy** – meaning is found in use of symbols.

Symbols and Rituals (Geertz and
Faith Behavior)

Geertz: Definition of Religion

❖ The definition of **religion** in social work literature often refers to as a set of beliefs, ethics, rituals, and practices, systematically organized around a doctrine or dogma and shared by a group of people (Hodge, 2001).

❖ Geertz (1973) defines religion interpretively as a cultural system of a society

    ❖ With a system of symbols

    ❖ That acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations

    ❖ By formulating conceptions of the general order of existence in which one discovers one's significance

    ❖ Imbuing these conceptions with an aura of factuality so the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic

Symbols and Rituals (Geertz and
Faith Behavior)

Religion – System of Symbols

❖ **Symbols** – anything that carries and conveys to (signifies to) people an idea (meaning), shared collectively although they enter into individual minds

❖ An object like a Buddhist prayer wheel

❖ An event like the crucifixion

❖ A simple wordless action like a gesture of compassion

❖ An image like that of a saint in a hospital room conveying the idea of divine concern for the sick

Religion-Creates Motivations and Moods (Ethos)

❖ Induces participants in religion dispositions to feel certain ways and to want to do certain things (Ethos-a model for life)

    ❖ Motivations – persistent tendencies associated with goals that are guided by an enduring set of values and incline person to perform certain actions in certain situations like quest for nirvana

        ❖ Buddhist monk has strong negative motivation when presented with American steak dinner (wrong to eat meat and wrong to eat large quantities of food – attachments to food weigh the monk down in struggle for better rebirth

    ❖ Moods – a set of feelings with limited duration, not directed to a particular consummation like awe, exultation

        ❖ Christian completing pilgrimage to Bethlehem experiences feeling of joy and inner peace

Religion-Depicts General Order of Existence (Worldview)

❖ Religion provides ultimate explanations of the world; a model of reality

 ❖ An ordering purpose to the world (with associated beliefs), one that provides meaning during moments that meaningless threatens in the form of

  ❖ The incomprehensible (intellectual chaos)

  ❖ Long term suffering (emotional chaos)

  ❖ Evil (moral chaos)

Religion-Unique Factuality

❖ Religion marks out a sphere of life that has a special status – one different from aesthetic, common sense, and scientific perspectives. It's symbols put us in touch

    ❖ With what is "really real," a compelling reality beyond the realities of everyday life accepted by means of faith

    ❖ With things that matter to people more than anything else

    ❖ With transcendent truths

    ❖ With another mode of existence

Symbols and Rituals (Geertz and Faith Behavior)

Summary: Definition

❖ In religious ritual (consecrated behavior expressed in dramatic ceremony), the members experience a symbolic fusion of ethos and world view (Geertz, 1973, page 114) and by participating in the ritual "attain their faith as they portray it" (page 114)

　❖ What people want to do and feel that they should do (their ethos / dispositions) joins with their picture of the the way the world actually is (their worldview / metaphysical conceptions) shaping their spiritual consciousness
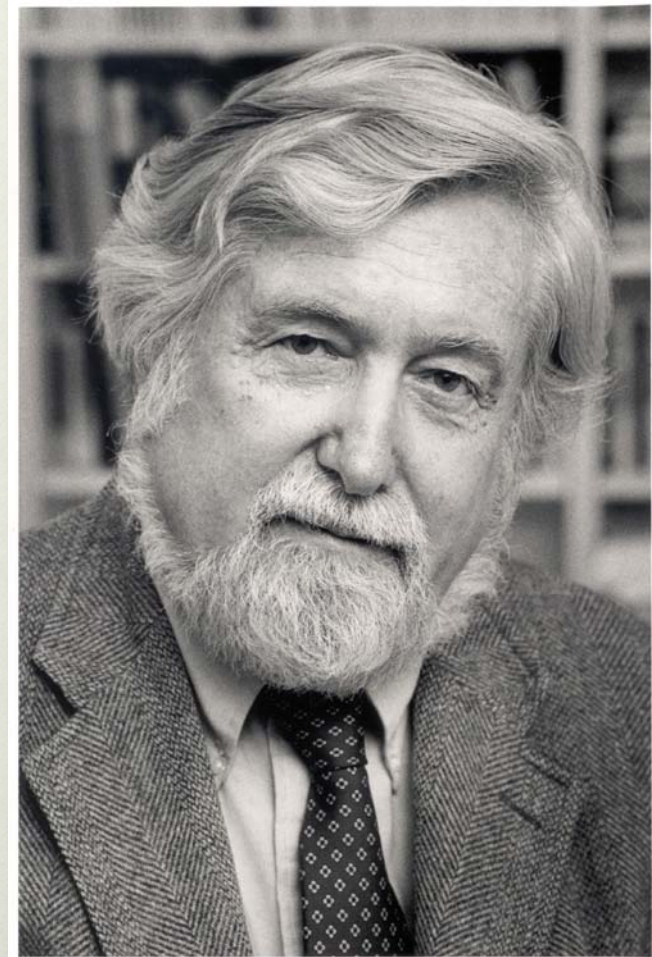
Exemplary Models

Symbols and Rituals (Geertz and
Faith Behavior)

Models/Exemplary Useful Theorist: Clifford Geertz

❖Pioneered anthropological study of symbols and the processes (such as myth and ritual) by which humans assign meanings to these symbols in order to address fundamental questions about meaning of human social life

❖Studied and wrote about religion in Bali, Java, Morocco

Models/Exemplary Useful Theorist: Mary Douglas

Symbolic anthropologist

❖ *Purity and danger* – study of moral symbols related to impurity (like Old Testament dietary laws) & related rituals to stay pure

❖Studied symbolic significance of basic activities. For example, she asserted that the changes in Vatican II affecting the symbolic qualities of the Mass, abstinence, and the habits worn by some religious orders weakened the social rituals and thereby the social boundaries of Catholicism

Applied Spirituality (The Symbolic Anthropology Approach)

Models/Exemplary Useful Theorist: Victor Turner

❖ Influential anthropologist, studied Ndembu people in Zambia, South Africa

❖ Theorized about symbols, ritual symbols, rites of passage, and relation of symbols to social processes and personal transfomration

Symbols and Rituals (Geertz and Faith Behavior)

Root Metaphors

Symbols and Rituals (Geertz and
Faith Behavior)

Root Metaphor-Person

❖ The person is like a **seeker on a quest** but but he quest is not a search in lands or seas but a search through

◆ religious rituals

◆ sacred songs and texts

◆ sacred places

◆ sacred objects

◆ the signatures of God in the natural and supernatural world (Blessings or grace; and signs from devil in form of temptations - in Christian tradition)
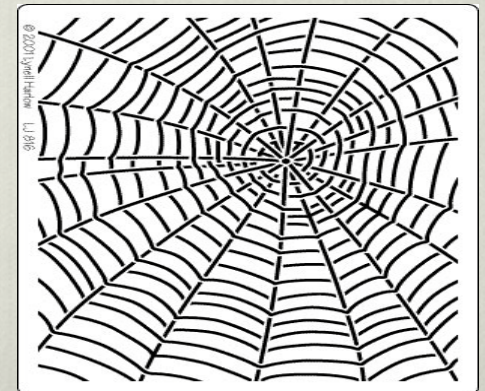
Root Metaphor-Person

❖ The person is **on a quest** for meanings such as

◆ the meaning of sacred symbols including those related to puzzlements regarding existential meaning (and their indications of the will of God)

◆ death,

◆ suffering,

◆ evil,

◆ the good life

Root Metaphor-Environment

Geertz - "man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs." (1973, p. 5)

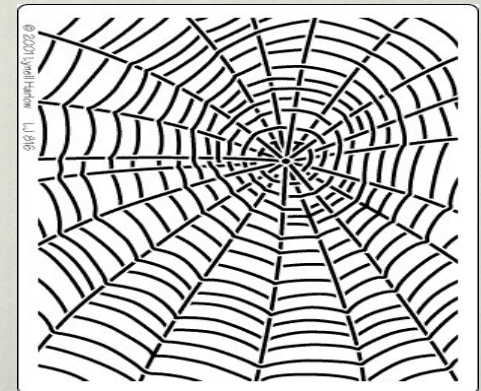Symbols and Rituals (Geertz and Faith Behavior)

Root Metaphor-Environment 1

The environment is like a **web of significance**, a tapestry of signs including symbols

❖ Pointing to sacred symbols and their transcendent meanings (God, eternal salvation, etc.) if we can disentangle each symbol and understand it as part of the web

❖ Binding us up yet also supporting us from suffering associated with uncertainty

❖ Implicating us in its maintenance (the web is spun by our culture and by our own participation in the culture)

Symbols and Rituals (Geertz and Faith Behavior)

Root Metaphors-Change

Change is like **illumination, a vision**

❖ An insight allowing a new interpretation of the meaning of a "sacred symbol"

❖ Or the generation of a new sacred symbol

Symbols and Rituals (Geertz and Faith Behavior)

Root Metaphor-Social Worker

The social worker is like an **applied anthropologist**

❖ Determining the meanings embedded in the symbols of a religious group and the group's rituals through immersion in their lives (like reader and interpreter of cultural "texts")

❖ Interpreting those meanings for the group members and for the outsiders (like cross cultural translator)

❖ Exploring the historical and social sources of the meanings as well as the consequences of the meanings for the psychological experiences of members of the group (like sociologist and psychologist)

❖ Helping clients access the resources dramatized in ritual and stored in symbols when they need to fine meaning at a deep level

Symbols and Rituals (Geertz and Faith Behavior)

Mapping Theoretical Structure

Geertz on Religion, Faith, and the Quest for Meaning

Symbols and Rituals (Geertz and
Faith Behavior)

Theoretical Map- Geertz Assumptions

❖Humans experience and relate to phenomena that transcend the natural world (transcendent meanings – supreme, beyond ordinary perception)

❖Humans use their culture's religious and spiritual symbols to discuss and derive meaning from these experiences and to guide their action and development.

❖There are myriad religious traditions, each with a distinctive symbol systems, for clarifying, celebrating, and consecrating its members' connections to the transcendent, higher order.

❖A religion shapes is members dispositions (moods, motivations, & morals) in ways affirming the conception of the higher order .

❖Helping a client starts with understanding the client's reference religious or spiritual systems and his or her individualization of the system's symbols and rituals.

❖Religion can be studied scientifically using methods of anthropology.

Symbols and Rituals (Geertz and
Faith Behavior)

Theoretical Map- Geertz Concepts

- ❖ Chaos

- ❖ Culture

- ❖ Dispositions (Moods and Motivations)

- ❖ Ethos /Model for Reality

- ❖ Meaning

- ❖ The Problem of Meaning

- ❖ Religion

- ❖ Religious Perspective

- ❖ Ritual

- ❖ Symbols

- ❖ Sacred Order

- ❖ Sacred Symbols

- ❖ Worldview /Model of Reality

Theoretical Map- Geertz Propositions

As part of the human experience, people are challenged by **problems of meaning** (events that can not be explained and suggest chaos) and these problems provoke a turn to our faith tradition for interpretive support.

- <u>anomalous events</u> or experiences that overwhelm and our analytical capabilities because we can't make sense of them (death, disaster, dreams, relationship crises) and evoke bafflement

- <u>suffering</u> and the challenge of enduring lengthy distress approaching human limits (situations like chronic illness evoking physical and emotional distress so great that person perceives life as dissolving into meaninglessness)

- <u>evil</u> occurrences difficult to interpret by using our moral insights and moral standards, and overwhelming our ability to make sound moral judgments

Symbols and Rituals (Geertz and Faith Behavior)

Theoretical Map- Geertz Propositions

Religion affirms that all aspects of life have meaning and that there are human responses to problems of meaning. Religion provides resources for finding meaning at its deepest level.

- by using sacred symbols (stored in the religion's system of symbols) that create an image of a sacred order and relate the "problem of meaning" to a sphere larger than the empirical world (the use of sacred symbols help humans manage problems of meaning)

- by dramatizing the responsive meanings through the use of sacred symbols in ritual and showing that threats of chaos (meaninglessness) are interpretable and meaningfulness can be achieved again (participation in religious rituals help humans manage problems of meaning)

Theoretical Map – Geertz Example

❖ Problem of meaning – death of a loved one by cancer

❖ One religious solution:

> ❖ ***Catholic funeral mass*** (ritual) with words, actions, and objects as sacred symbols. Participants share vigil, voice liturgy, pray, support each other, and meditate silently - meaning is that deceased person's spirit now rests eternally in heaven.

> ❖ Assuages loss, sorrow, fear; offers hope, consolation, and calmness to mourners (mood)

> ❖ Reminds mourners that life of faith with good actions and confession of misdeeds will result in salvation and eternal life (motivations and morals)
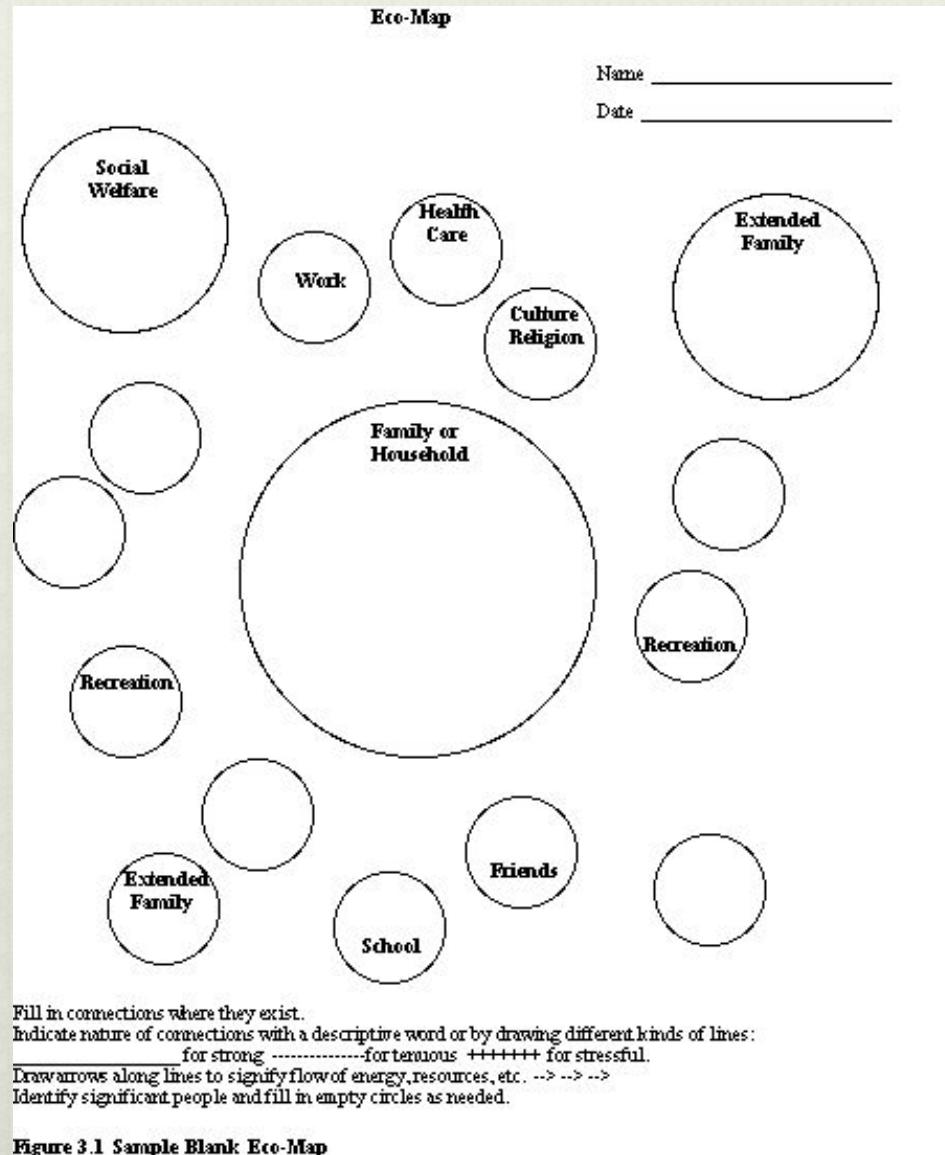
Mapping: Eco-Map Translations

Symbols and Rituals (Geertz and
Faith Behavior)

- ❖ The
- ❖ Eco-
- ❖ Map

Figure 3.1 Sample Blank Eco-Map

Symbols and Rituals (Geertz and Faith Behavior)

Eco-Map Translation- Connections

❖ **Positive Connections** – communion with the sacred order (respect symbols, converse with God, feel "Spirit," faith full)

   ❖ Moods – adoration, love, hope, reverence

   ❖ Motivations – acts of care, charity, service

   ❖ Morals – pursue higher ideals, virtue, good life

❖ **Negative Connections** – estrangement from sacred order (disrespect symbols, curse God, faith less)

   ❖ Moods – hate, dread, self pity

   ❖ Motivations – selfish and anti-social acts

   ❖ Morals – pursue evil and sinful ways

❖ **Tenuous Connections** – doubt about sacred and unity

Eco-Map Translation-Focal System

❖ Person as imbued with spirit or soul, in dialogue with sacred (God, nature), committed to sacred symbols and religious rituals

Symbols and Rituals (Geertz and Faith Behavior)

Eco-Map Translation- The Environment

Conception of **Environment**

❖ To the natural, material, visible, social, temporal, and mundane environment

❖ Supernatural, non-material, invisible, sacred, eternal, transcendent realm is added

Natural world **rich with signs and symbols** of supernatural

❖ Sacred signs and symbols of the holy (God, etc)

❖ Sacred objects, places, persons, events (omens, miracles)

❖ Signs and symbols of forces opposing holy (linked to devil, evil spirits, etc.)

Eco-Map Translation-Priority Systems

- ❖ Ancestors as spirits / souls

- ❖ Congregation of faithful (share system of symbols)

- ❖ Devil and satanic assistants

- ❖ Divine personages – saints, angels Virgin Mary

- ❖ Ministers (agents of the sacred) – rabbis, priests, shamans

- ❖ Mystics / Prophets – provide new interpretations of symbols, create new symbols

- ❖ Places of worship – temple, church, mosque, natural setting, shrines

- ❖ Religious institution – Roman Catholic with hierarchy, for example

- ❖ Supreme being (God, Mother Nature, Holy Trinity – God, Jesus, Holy Spirit)

Symbols and Rituals (Geertz and Faith Behavior)

Eco-Map Translation-Resources (Christian Traditions)

To the member

- ❖ The Congregation of Faithful – social network for spiritual and material support

- ❖ Blessings from God, his ministers

- ❖ Sacraments (communion, confession, marriage, extreme unction)

- ❖ Sacred beings & places

To the church / God

- ❖ Participation in ritual
- ❖ Service
- ❖ Tithing
- ❖ Worship

Symbols and Rituals (Geertz and Faith Behavior)

Eco-Map Translation-Actual–Ideal Configurations

Actual Eco-Map

Useless symbols & rituals

Create dispositions

    moods

    motivations

    morals

Undermines sacred order / religious identity

Intolerance of other religious symbol systems

Ideal Eco-Map

Useful symbols & rituals

Create pro-social dispositions

    moods

    motivations

    morals

Affirms sacred order / religious identity

Tolerance of other religious symbols systems

Symbols and Rituals (Geertz and Faith Behavior)

Eco-Map Translation-Descriptive Words

❖ Awe, confession, conversion, epiphany, ethos, faith, faith development, good, holy, miracles, prayer, profane, purity, redemption, religion, religious belief, religiosity, evil, ritual, sacraments, sacred, sin, soul, spirit, spirituality, theology, transcendence, world view, worship

Eco-Map Translation- Change Logic

❖ Conception of Change

   ❖ Transformation in system system (culture) / structure of meanings embedded in sacred symbols (about self, relationships, nature, God)

❖ Features

   ❖ Epiphany – sudden transformation (rebirth)

   ❖ Conversion – slow, guided transformation

Eco-Map Translation-Assessment Process

❖ Conception of **Assessment**

  ❖ Thick description of a religious culture (ethnography) following immersion in their life

❖ **Factors Assessed**

  ❖ Problems of meaning

  ❖ System of sacred symbols and relation of symbols to social structure

  ❖ Rituals

  ❖ Use of sacred symbols by members involved in ritual to address issues of meaning

  ❖ Development of transcendent meanings across life span

Symbols and Rituals (Geertz and Faith Behavior)

Eco-Map Translation-Intervention Process (Catholic Tradition)

❖ **Uses of Intervention** (Social worker collaborating with priests, nuns, etc.) –

  ❖ clarify meaning of sacred symbols (Exegesis of Bible passage) in relation to a problem of meaning

  ❖ creating new sacred symbols or new interpretations of old symbols to address problem of meaning (theologians on limbo, for instance)

  ❖ celebrate the holy through ritual etc., -- consecrating or transforming the mundane into the sacred (a couple uniting marriage ceremony, blessing of farm tractors and animals) affirming meaningfulness of life and sacred meanings

Eco-Map Translation-Intervention Process (Catholic Tradition)

❖ **Illustrations of Interventions** (Rituals)

    ❖ Baptism, Eucharist, Reconciliation (Confession), Confirmation, Marriage, Holy Orders, Anointing of the Sick

❖ **Illustrations of Interventions** (Disciplinary Practices Supporting Ritual Participation / not emphasized by Geertz)

    ❖ Acts of mercy, alms giving, chanting, contemplation, fasting, meditation and mindfulness practice, prayer, singing

Eco-Map Translation-Additions

❖ Addition to Conventional Eco-Map

  ❖ Sacred domain and elements

  ❖ Temporal extension – back to souls / spirits of ancestors, forward to afterlife

Method: Geertz on Inquiry

Symbols and Rituals (Geertz and
Faith Behavior)

Geertz and Method of Inquiry

❖ Inquiry into faith behavior involves

  ❖ analysis of the systems of meaning embodied in the symbols constituting the religion proper

    ❖ interpret or make sense of the public symbols of members of a religious group in terms of the role they play in lives of the members

  ❖ relating of these systems of meaning to social structural processes and psychological processes (1973, p. 125)

Cultural Hermeneutics

❖ Detailed analysis of context and (Geertz, 1983)

❖ Geertz used hermeneutics in his studies of symbol systems to try to understand the ways that people "understand and act in social, religious, and economic contexts"

   ❖ Religious culture like a text - "The culture of a people is an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong" (Geertz 1973, p. 452)

Ethnography and Thick Description

❖ Thick Description is a term borrowed by Geertz from Gilbert Ryle to describe and define the aim of interpretive anthropology.

  ❖ Symbolic Anthropology is based on ethnography, or the study of culture.

  ❖ Culture, in turn, is based on the symbols that inform and guide community behavior.

  ❖ Symbols obtain meaning from the role (uses) which they play in the patterned behavior of social life. Because of the intertwined nature of culture and behavior, they cannot be studied separately.

  ❖ By analyzing culture, one develops a "thick description" of a culture which details "what the natives think they are up to." This thick description is developed by looking at both the whole culture and the parts of the culture (such as rituals). Thick description is an interpretation of what the natives are thinking made by an outsider who cannot think like a native (Geertz 1973

Symbols and Rituals (Geertz and
Faith Behavior)

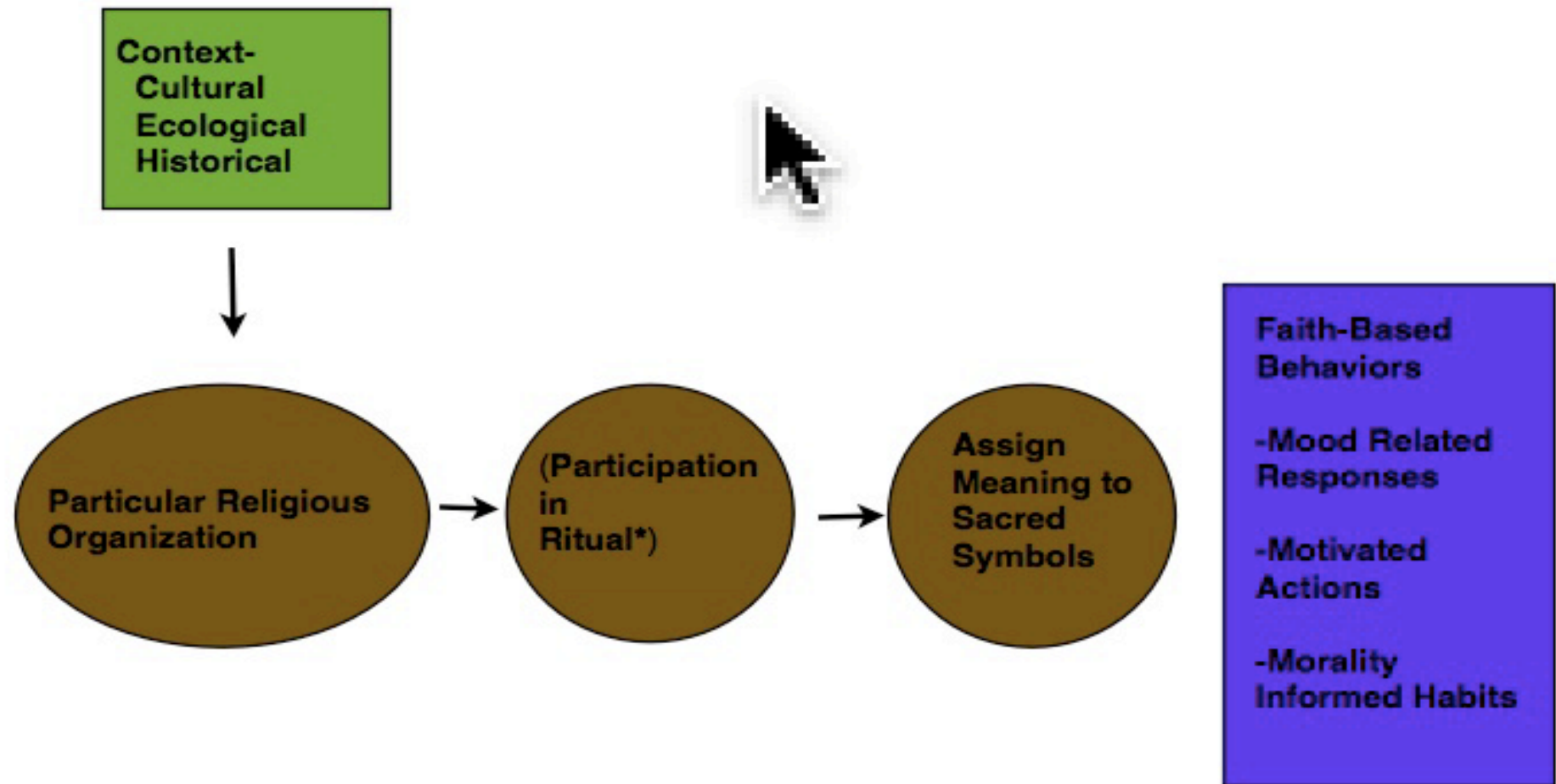# Theory-Based Interpretation – Illustrations

❖ How might we understand the demand by the Catholic religion that priests take a vow of **celibacy**?

  ❖ Celibacy is a symbol signifying a special quality

  ❖ Priests represent the highest, "other worldly" values of the religious community and the jobs of priests is to use symbols to celebrate the highest sacred values

  ❖ Sex is a bodily activity; urges may overwhelm commitments; sex is associated often with "falling" & guilt

  ❖ Celibacy stands for a renunciation of any worldly activity that might undermine the priest's work in the community with sacred symbols (Cuzzort & King, 1989)

Middle-Range Theorizing: Faith Behaviors and Practices

Symbols and Rituals (Geertz and
Faith Behavior)

Symbols and Rituals: Geertz and An Interpretive Approach to Faith-Based Behavior

Context-Cultural Ecological Historical

Particular Religious Organization → **(Participation in Ritual*)** → **Assign Meaning to Sacred Symbols**

Faith-Based Behaviors

-Mood Related Responses

-Motivated Actions

-Morality Informed Habits

*Designed to fuse worldview/ "model of" (religion's shared doctrines and beliefs) and ethos / "model for" (religious moods, motivations, and morals) as related to the sacred order and affirming comprehensibility of life.

Geertz Approach: Middle Range Theorizing about Lakota Sioux Smudging

❖ Smudging ceremony – woman walks around circle and waves scented smoke to members

❖ Sage symbolized purification

    ❖ Lakota worldview – look for the light and positive energy in everything

    ❖ Lakota ethos – live life purely with temperament of love and respect for nature

    ❖ Related to sacred order – people inherently hold on to some evil and it takes a conscious effort to avoid that energy

Geertz Approach: Lakota Sioux Smudging 2

❖ Members use smudging ceremony and sage symbol

  ❖ to chase away "dirt" of impure thoughts and actions

  ❖ when shooting dear to show respect by placing sage in its mouth and praying for the life it had

  ❖ To affirm necessities implied Lakota sacred order and purifying self in readiness to care for family and neighbors with strength and courage

❖ The sage sends people back into their everyday lives with the notion that the pure necessities are the most important. It communicates to people that the way they see the world makes sense that they will benefit from purifying their minds and lives from the unnecessary and negative energies. The practice of smudging is a simple ritual that communicates the Lakota cultural model, and therefore the ritual is the truth (McKeon, 2014)

Marks of Excellence: Theory Appraisal

Symbols and Rituals (Geertz and
Faith Behavior)

Theory Appraisal: Marks

❖ Empirical: Testability

  ❖ Methodological issue – how are interpretations of a religious culture by a symbolic anthropologist validated?

  ❖ Evidence issue – mixed support for theory claims

❖ Sociology of science

  ❖ Advance in puzzle solving but issues of philosophy of science assumptions

❖ Practical

  ❖ Clarity of concepts issues

❖ Social work ethics and values

  ❖ Affirms diversity

Marks of Excellence –
Social Work Value: Affirm Diversity

Issue of Pluralism and Interpretive Priority

- ❖ Different societies in different physical environments face different problems of meaning and thus, have developed different religious symbols systems

    - ❖ interpret how others interpret with cultural competence and humility

- ❖ In a pluralistic society, a member may creatively synthesize symbols from different religious traditions to form unique amalgam

Additional Resources

Symbols and Rituals (Geertz and
Faith Behavior)

Key Theoretical Terms

- ❖ Culture

- ❖ Ethnography

- ❖ Evil

- ❖ Faith

- ❖ Model of / Model For

- ❖ Prayer

- ❖ Problem of Meaning

- ❖ Religion

- ❖ Religion

- ❖ Ritual

- ❖ The Sacred Order

- ❖ Thick Description

- ❖ Transcendence

My Name is Forte, James Forte

Biography: James A. Forte

Forte is professor at Salisbury University, author of four books and 35 articles, and a presenter at international, national, regional, and local conferences. Forte has been teaching human behavior classes for 16 years, and recently completed 2 books: *An Introduction to Using Theory* and *Skills for Using Theory*. His teaching awards include Outstanding Virginia Social Work Educator, Outstanding Teaching at Christopher Newport University, and NASW-MD Chapter Social Work Educator of the Year.

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An Introduction to
Using Theory in
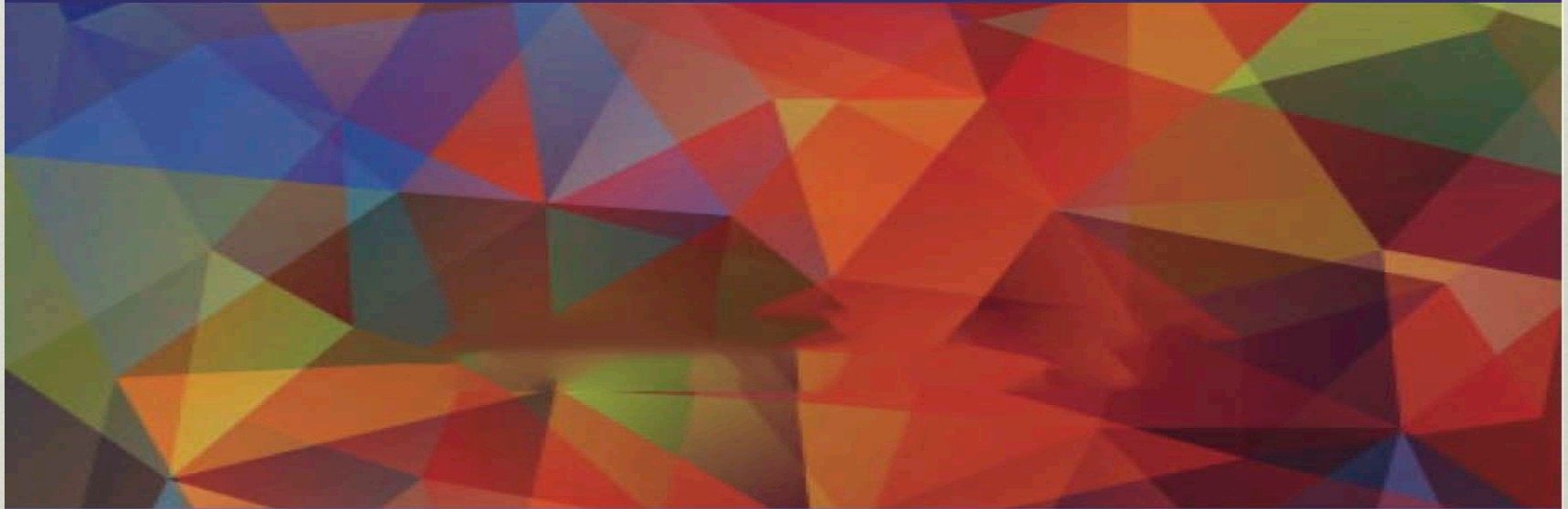# Social Work Practice
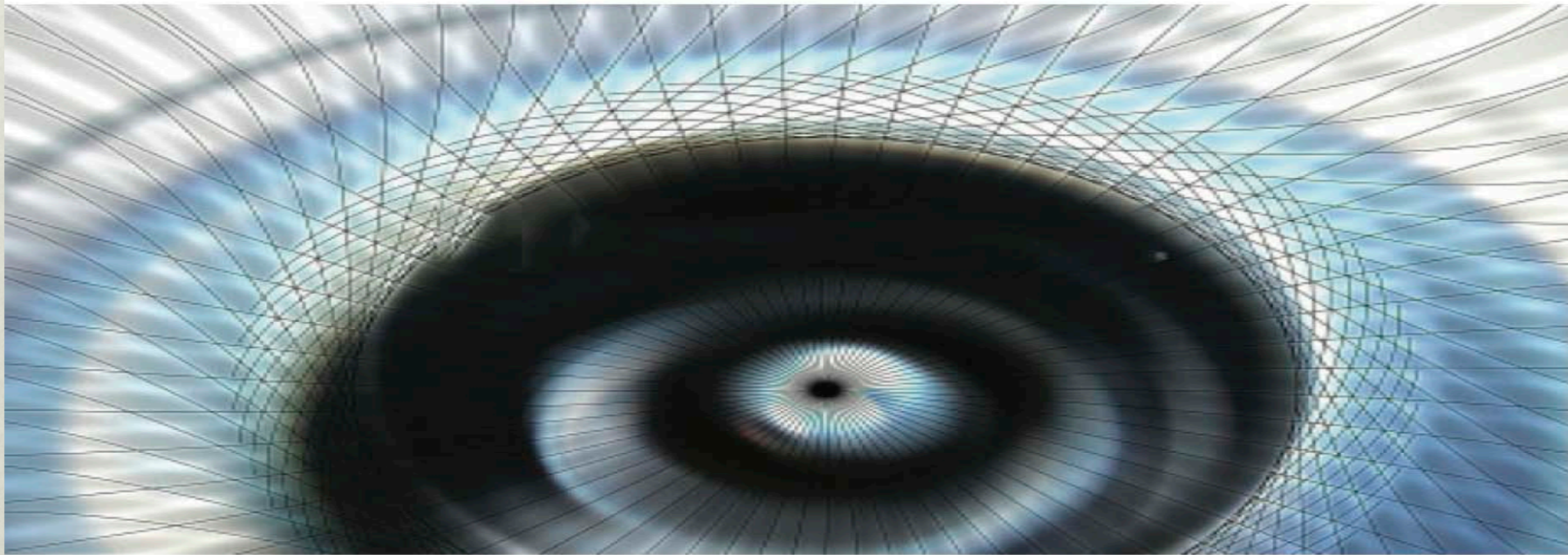
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Skills for
Using Theory
in Social Work

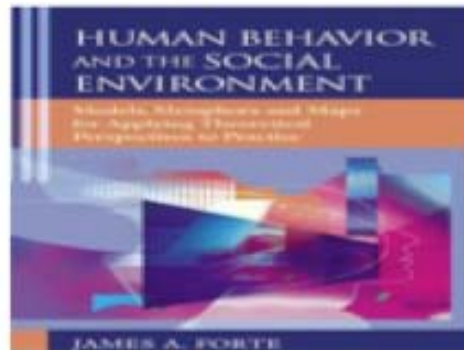## 32 Lessons for Evidence-Informed Practice

James A. Forte

Human Behavior and the Social Environment: Models, Metaphors, and Maps for Applying Theoretical Perspectives to Practice, 1st Edition

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Available Now. List Price: $67.95, Thomsonedu Web Price: **$61.16**

The Book in a Nutshell

This first edition theories-based book provides students with key tools for theory-by-theory comprehension: models, metaphors and maps. These tools help students to easily compare and contrast theories as well as understand their relevance to social work practice. The book also helps students to develop theorizing competencies: analysis, synthesis, evaluation, application, and communication. This book is the ideal textbook for your "Human Behavior and the Social Environment" course, or the perfect supplement for your "Social Work Practice" course.

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